The Iconography of Famine

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Famine as political atrocity

In the twentieth century more than 70 million people worldwide died from famine, making it the most famine-stricken period in history. Given that the capacity to abolish famine globally was achieved in the twentieth century, preventable mass death on this scale constitutes an atrocity. Framing the issue in this way radically revises conventional understandings of famine and poses a fundamental challenge to the way famines are photographed.

There have been two shifts in how famine has been understood in recent times. As Stephen Devereux makes clear, while famine is by definition a food crisis, the nature of such crises is many and varied, such that simple interpretations of famine as a natural disaster have been superseded by more complex understandings that highlight political responsibility. With over 80% of famine deaths in the twentieth century located in China and the Soviet Union, and all those deaths occurring before 1965, the importance of political context is clearly paramount.¹

Indeed, we can extend the focus on political responsibility and conclude that ‘nothing “causes” famine: people commit the crime of mass starvation.’²

The fact that famines are inescapably political is underpinned by the second important development in the twentieth century, whereby food crises are now located almost entirely in sub-Saharan Africa, where the intersection of political conflict and natural factors has been most acute. This means that states previously free of food crises have become prone to conflict-induced famines. The first and most notable of these crises was Biafra in the late 1960s, yet this region of Nigeria was devoid of famine before the civil war and has remained free from famine since.³
While our understanding of the causes and context of famine has undergone major revision in the twentieth century, the photographic portrayal of food crises has remained largely static through the use of stereotypes. A stereotype is something preconceived or oversimplified that is constantly repeated without change. Stereotypes involve icons, which are figures that represent events or issues. Icons have a sacred history but the attention they attract as objects of our gaze can produce a range of affects depending on time and place. The photographic deployment of particular icons via an established aesthetic to represent famine is a clear example of stereotypes at work. It is well illustrated by the 13 July 2003 cover of *The New York Times Magazine* designed to feature a story on ‘Why Famine Persists.’ With a montage of thirty-six black and white photographs depicting famines in various African countries between 1968 and 2003, the unchanging reliance on portraits of either lone children or women in distress was there for all to see.\(^4\) The cover included images from well-known photographers – including Abbas, Eve Arnold, Stuart Franklin, and Chris Steele-Perkins of Magnum – but the article did not address the persistence of this photographic style across time and place.

This essay examines the iconography of famine, asking how and why stereotypical portraits of famine victims continue to be produced, and considering what effect this persistent representation has on our understanding of the political complexities of food crises. In the last decade there have been a number of food crises that could have served as examples for this analysis, including repeated events in Ethiopia and Sudan.\(^5\) However, my argument here focuses on the case of Malawi in 2002 because of the way this food crisis demonstrates clearly the political nature of contemporary famine, and because of the way one of the iconic photographs
from this context travelled across the media to be used in a number of different ways.

The Malawi famine of 2002

Figure 1: ‘Luke Piri, aged 3, suffering severe malnutrition, with his ribs exposed and distended belly he waits for his first meal since arriving at an orphan’s feeding centre in Ludzi, eastern Malawi,’ May 2002. Used with permission from Mirropix.

‘Africa’s dying again’ was The Daily Mirror’s cover story on 21 May 2002.6

This ‘shock report’ was illustrated on the cover by staff photographer Mike Moore’s picture of Luke Piri (Figure 1), taken during a trip to Malawi with journalist Anton
Antonowicz to uncover what the paper described as the ‘world’s worst tragedy since Ethiopia.’

The colour photograph of Piri was one of at least three of the boy Moore took while in Ludzi near the Malawi-Zambian border. Two of the images show Piri posed against a bare wall, dressed only in pants, and looking directly if plaintively into the camera. One of the photos (not published in the paper) has Piri holding up an empty white bowl, chipped on the rim and containing no more than a single spoon, as though imploring the viewer for food. Another (that appears inside the paper alongside an equally emaciated girl) looks down on Piri as a staff member at the feeding centre holds him. Piri’s dark eyes offer the only expression on an otherwise blank face. The caption – ‘HOPE: Luke Piri, three, clings to life’ – anchors the message.

Moore’s photograph of Piri was constructed as a portrait of atrocity. The three images of Luke Piri demonstrate the photographer organised the pictures, getting the boy to stand in front of a blank backdrop, and directing him to either hold a bowl or stand with his hands by his sides. As such, it follows in the footsteps of similar pictures, such as Don McCullin’s photograph of the Biafran girl Patience, which McCullin took after getting a mission orderly to arrange her with hands obscuring genitalia for the sake of dignity. It is another of the icons that make up the stereotypical representation of famine.

Moore’s Malawi photographs were framed by both the purpose and presentation of the newspaper’s story. In the second paragraph of the article the function of the image is laid bare: ‘the emaciated body of the three-year-old in our front-page picture is covered in scabies. His belly is distended. His ribs racked. His
suffering a symbol of famine stalking this tiny, landlocked nation.’ In conjunction with the headline about the scale of the imminent disaster, and opposite a half-page image of an outstretched hand displaying the dry grass that is said to substitute for food, the story is designed to jolt readers into action. With another banner headline declaring, ‘crops have failed, food prices have rocketed...’ the paper is asking people to make charitable donations, and details of how to contribute to a Save the Children fund appeal are prominently displayed at the bottom of the page.

The text of the article claims that both ‘excessive rains and prolonged drought depleted the maize harvest’ and led to food shortages, giving credence to the idea that this is another natural disaster. However, the article also mentions a range of political factors responsible for the crisis, including the liberalisation of agricultural policy foisted on a corrupt Malawian government by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which resulted in the selling off of grain stocks that could have provided cover for food shortages. The situation in Malawi in 2002 embodied, therefore, the new understanding of famine as political.

Malawi is a country ‘in a perpetual state of food emergency.’ A litany of development statistics underscore the population’s ongoing vulnerability to food shortages: two thirds of the population live below the national poverty line, more than a quarter live in extreme poverty, and a third of the population have consistently poor levels of nutrition. This vulnerability was made more acute by the combined effects of international and national governance strategies. More than a decade of structural adjustment policies promoted by the IMF, the World Bank and major donor countries removed subsidies for small farmers, dismantled price controls, and privatised social agencies that had previously eased food insecurity.
These changes in Malawi’s political economy were evident in the sell-off of the Strategic Grain Reserve in 2002, only a few months after the Minister of Agriculture had warned the country’s donors that a food deficit was forthcoming. In April 2002, shortly after international donors removed Malawi from the Highly Indebted Poor Country interim debt relief program over concerns about government corruption, the IMF recommended Malawi sell two thirds of its grain reserves to repay a commercial South African bank loan. Going beyond the IMF position, the Malawian government sold all its grain stocks, resulting in private traders hoarding supplies in order to maximise profit. In the absence of price controls, the cost of maize had risen by 400 percent in the six months to March 2002, so the confluence of these forces greatly hindered access to food. As Devereux makes clear, ‘famines are always a problem of disrupted access to food as much as restricted availability,’ and the political economy of access is more important than the restricted availability flowing from natural triggers.12

The Daily Mirror story stated the natural triggers for the 2002 food crisis in Malawi were ‘only part of the picture’ and they are surely correct in that assessment. We have to question, therefore, whether the photographs of Luke Piri are consistent with a story that encompasses both natural and political dimensions, and in which access to food is more significant than simple availability. Do the stereotypes allow for an understanding of the inherently political nature of famine? If not, what is their specific function and how do we explain their persistence?
The meaning of famine icons

Portraits individualise the social, and the photograph of Luke Piri, as a portrait of atrocity, conforms to what Kleinmann and Kleinmann call the ‘ideologically Western mode’ whereby ‘famine becomes the experience of the lone individual.’\(^\text{13}\) Regardless of the content of any supporting text, photographs of this kind suggest the individual is a victim without a context. Indigenous social structures are absent and local actors are erased. There is a void of agency and history with the victim arrayed passively before the lens so their suffering can be appropriated.\(^\text{14}\)

As appropriations of suffering, photographs are affective rather than simply illustrative. They are designed to appeal emotionally to viewers and connect them with subjects in a particular way. The message is that someone is suffering, we should be sympathetic to his or her plight and moved to do something. However, the lack of contextual support means that viewers regard action to alleviate suffering as coming from outside. This structuring of the isolated victim awaiting external assistance is what invests such imagery with colonial relations of power.

As an historical and political formation, colonialism involves the governance of an indigenous population by a distant power. The practices of governmentality through which indigenous lives are managed are asymmetrical and result in unequal relations that structure the relationship of self and other, us and them, as superior/inferior, civilized/barbaric, developed/underdeveloped and so on. The colonial relationship between self and other can be conducted in a number of different modes, from violent suppression to a humanitarian concern with the well being of colonial subjects, and it is the latter that the photographic stereotypes of famine invoke.
This is especially evident when the famine icons are portraits of children. The efficacy of the child as symbol flows from a number of associated cultural assumptions: children are abstracted from culture and society, granted an innate innocence, seen to be dependent, requiring protection and having developmental potential. By removing context while indicating the future, such imagery turns a particular individual into ‘a universal icon of human suffering,’ thereby depoliticising the circumstances through which the life of the photographed individual has been produced. At the same time, because these tropes have a long colonial history, stereotypical photographs embody colonial relations of power that contrast an adult and superior global North with the infantilised and inferior global South. This is evident from The Daily Mirror’s use of the Luke Piri photograph on its cover alongside the headline ‘Africa’s dying again.’ The continent is constructed in relation to the photograph, thereby infantilizing and homogenizing a space home to a billion people in 61 diverse political territories, most of which are not subject to famine.

The photographs of Luke Piri had a long life and travelled to other locations. For example, only weeks after appearing in the newspaper the same picture (albeit reversed) was used by a UK charity for an appeal advertisement. While similar pictures continue to dominate charitable appeals regardless of the time, place or issue, aid organizations working to provide assistance in the global South have signed up to codes of conduct designed to limit both the proliferation and negative effects of stereotypical images. However, there is no escaping the fact that because photographs are polyvalent they can sustain paradoxical readings. In this sense, the malnourished child can be both a sign of humanitarian values and the symbol of an
infantile, inferior and helpless zone of despair. This is evident in the third iteration of Piri’s photograph (Figure 2).

In July 2005, to commemorate Live 8, the campaign for increased assistance for Africa from G8 nations, the Sunday Mirror produced a montage of the continent by assembling a gallery of famine icons. Recalling the New York Times Magazine
cover of two years earlier, this representation included two photographs of Luke Piri – one, with empty food bowl in hand, was printed over a space stretching from Senegal to Cote d’Ivoire, while the same reversed picture used in the earlier charity appeal bestrode the centre of this pictorial map. Like the 2002 Daily Mirror cover, the homogenization and infantilization of the continent as a ‘basket case’ awaiting external aid is obvious.

The re-use of the Piri photograph, its iteration regardless of context, is the very definition of a stereotype at work. This is reinforced by the fact that as a campaign twenty years on from the Live Aid phenomenon, Live 8 was said to be about justice not charity, aimed to make poverty history rather than respond to a specific famine, and involved political mobilisation rather than fund raising. Nonetheless, despite these contrasting goals, the same visual strategies that dominated the coverage of the 1984 Ethiopian famine were redeployed in 2005. Most striking in this regard was the rebroadcast of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation film that contained images of a young child, Birhan Woldu, who appeared at the Live 8 concert in London to demonstrate the importance of relief assistance (Figure 3). When first broadcast during Live Aid in 1984 it had an immediate impact on the audience and was shown a further two times, with its boost to the fundraising effort described as ‘immeasurable.’ In 2005 it was re-used to put a familiar face on the issue of ‘Africa’ and its power was undiminished.
The function of famine icons

The 1984 Ethiopian famine was a watershed in terms of how we think about the impact of famine iconography. Through both television and print the stereotypical pictures helped produce the Live Aid phenomenon, one of the largest charity efforts ever. The affective power of these images connected with a global audience, generating donations worth more than £250 million in today’s currency. One question arising from this is the nature of the affect produced: was it
compassion directed towards specific individuals, or was it pity, an abstract and
generalizable condition with colonial traces? Did it connect people to the context
of the famine, or was it a case of viewing suffering at a distance that confirmed our
sense of superiority through the portrayal of ‘barbarism’ over there?

In the aftermath of the Ethiopian famine and Live Aid, a Europe-wide ‘Image
of Africa’ project studied the media representation of the Ethiopian famine. Oxfam’s
UK report concluded that mother-and-child photographs were the dominant visual
strategy across the newspapers, and that these images manifested a number of
problems:

All these pictures overwhelmingly showed people as needing our pity – as
passive victims. This was through a de-contextualised concentration on mid-
and close-up shots emphasising body language and facial expressions. The
photos seemed mainly to be taken from a high angle with no eye contact,
thus reinforcing the viewer’s sense of power compared with their apathy and
hopelessness.

The photographic examples discussed in this chapter demonstrate the
persistence of this aesthetic. Part of the explanation for this reiteration of
stereotypes might be found in what social psychologists call the ‘identifiable victim
effect,’ which describes the way ‘people react differently toward identifiable victims
than to statistical victims who have not yet been identified.’ The central claim of
the ‘identifiable victim effect’ is that a photograph of an individual person in distress
in any given disaster is more effective than accounts of the collective at risk or dying from that situation.

This argument has been supported by a series of psychological studies. One asked givers to respond to a statistical description of food shortages in southern Africa affecting three million children versus a personal appeal with a picture of a young Malawian girl, and the identified victim triggered a much higher level of sympathy and greater donations. In a similar study, when potential donors were faced with the option of helping two children rather than a single individual, the response for the individual was far greater than for the pair. In analysing the form of the image that best elicits a response, researchers found that sad facial expressions produced a much greater response than happy or neutral images, and that this was achieved through ‘emotional contagion,’ whereby viewers ‘caught’ vicariously the emotion on a victim’s face.

These studies report results from experimental environments but don’t detail what makes identifiable victims affective agents. They speculate that the reasons could include the idea that a single individual is viewed as a psychologically coherent unity, whereas a group is not; that identifiable victims are more vivid and compelling than colourless representations; that identifiable victims are actual rather than likely victims; and that by identifying an individual blame for their condition can be more easily (if not more accurately) attached. In the end, though, to pose the issue in these terms is limiting, because whether we are concerned with compassion, empathy, pity or sympathy as the prevailing affect, they are structurally individualistic and limited to the vicarious experience of suffering between two
individuals (the victim and the spectator) and can thus only ever deal with the particular rather than the general.\textsuperscript{27}

The primacy of individual, identifiable victims is produced and sustained by photography as a technology of visualization. That is because the humanist tradition of documentary photography and photojournalism is itself somatic; that is, it has historically relied on images of the individual (their body and face) in order to signify social issues. However, the images of individuals produced by documentary photography represent neither simple individuals nor complex abstractions. Rather, these somatic images embody a specific way of being human that Hariman and Lucaites call the ‘individuated aggregate.’\textsuperscript{28} In this understanding, the individuated aggregate, although appearing in a photograph as a singular person or persons, depicts collective experience metonymically by reducing a general construct (famine) to a specific embodiment (child). The individuated aggregate has to be personal enough to convey the details of a particular life, but equally impersonal so those details do not derail a larger generalization.

This dual characteristic help explains how certain photographic forms – such as the mother-and-child portraits that abound in crisis situations – become icons that have staying power through time despite varying contexts. The metonymic structure of the individuated aggregate also serves another double function, one related to the work photographs do as opposed to the things they represent. Photographs prompt structures of feeling historically present in audiences, using the somatic form to place viewers in an affective relationship with the subject.

The psychological studies discussed above confirm this at an individual level, but what Hariman and Lucaites have done is render this understanding in collective
terms. In this context, documentary photography, itself a liberal humanitarian technology, works to activate a humanitarian structure of feeling, proffering via that structure of feeling a particular problematization of the event that calls forth established charitable and humanitarian modes of response. The individuated aggregate allows the figure of the individual to embody a larger social and political context ‘in a manner that fulfils both the need for collective action and the primacy of individual autonomy in a liberal-democratic society.’ However, given the way it secures liberal individualism, the collective action inspired by the individuated aggregate will be charitable and humanitarian, will not contest the fundamentals of liberalism at home or abroad, and will elide the political context that has given rise to the crisis in question.

The possible need for famine icons

The easy conclusion of this analysis is that famine iconography should be roundly condemned as simplistic, reductionist, colonial and even racist. But before we are satisfied with this comprehensive rebuke we have to ask a couple of difficult questions. First, would we be better off without these photographs altogether? Of course, that depends on who the ‘we’ is. It might be easy to say that it would be better for us in the global North to be free from portraits of atrocity, but does the same apply to citizens of the global South? What would it mean to have no images of atrocities like famine? Notwithstanding their critique of the appropriation of suffering in famine iconography, Kleinmann and Kleinmann argue that the absent image is equally a form of political appropriation and that – thinking about the visual
lacunae of the Chinese famine of 1959-61 – ‘public silence is perhaps more terrifying than being overwhelmed by public images of atrocity.’

Second, if we want to dispense with the negative, what might be the positive that should take its place? In their *Images of Africa* report, Nikki van der Gaag and Cathy Nash noted research showing photographs of smiling, satisfied individuals conveyed the idea that ‘we must have helped them’ so that viewers believed ‘all Africans had become ‘aided Africans’.’ This means the scopic regime that produces ‘Africa’ as a place of lack is so strong that many positive images only reinforce the colonial relations of power embodied in the negative images. Indeed, one of the few studies on the effect of atrocity images from ‘Africa’, *The Live Aid Legacy*, demonstrated that ‘80% of the British public strongly associate the developing world with doom-laden images of famine, disaster and Western aid,’ thereby establishing a relationship where we are superior because of our humanitarian aid and charitable giving, and they are inferior, passive and dependent on us.

The coeval relationship of the negative and positive suggests that we need to move beyond these terms in framing our options. The South African photographer Guy Tillim put it well in a 2009 interview:

One has to be careful with the positive/negative thing. Just because one takes images of dance halls in Lagos, and people being happy, it might end up being as much of a cliché as the suffering image. Positives images are one[s] that are self-aware or are interesting, penetrat[ing] and original no matter what they look at. Negatives images are ones that perpetuate the issue.
Tillim helps recast our sense of what is positive and negative by moving us towards an appreciation of the need for visual strategies that, by being reflexive and penetrating, understand what the stereotypes are and how they can be contested. This involves much more than rejecting one aesthetic and replacing it with another, not least because of the importance of continuing to see photographic records of atrocity. While their persistence and problems need to be analysed, this means we need to be less concerned about the presence of famine icons and more concerned about the absence of alternative, critical visualizations that can assist in capturing the political context of crises, thereby potentially shifting the scopic regime from the colonial to the postcolonial.

In moving beyond negative versus positive as the limit of our critical understanding, we also need to appreciate that there are moments when famine icons might be necessary in order to address the political context. Indeed, we might understand famine iconography as being produced by the complex political circumstances it generally fails to capture. This can be demonstrated by a return to the case of the Malawi famine of 2002.

There was advance warning of food shortages in Malawi, but because of their strained relations with the government international donors ‘were not well disposed to reports of food shortages.’ The Malawian government was also resistant to stories of food crises from local NGOs. It was, in part, the production and circulation of famine iconography that broke this indifference. As Devereux’s post-mortem of the crisis observed, ‘only after the media started reporting starvation deaths in Malawi did the donors reverse their hardline stance and offer food aid unconditionally.’ The same dynamic has been repeated in other crises, such as the 2005 Niger famine,
where the World Food Program (WFP) began reporting a looming crisis in October 2004 and called for donor assistance, but international assistance was minimal until the media got involved in July 2005. Anthea Webb, WFP’s senior public affairs officer notes:

All information is available. The problem is to turn information into providing food to people in need. In Niger we had practically nothing until we got footage on video of people dying of malnutrition to the BBC. But it is much better to help people before it is too late. In Niger we had made a very clear plea. The problem is getting the message across.35

Although a free press has been regarded by many as part of a famine early warning system, this record indicates the media is caught in a tragic conundrum. Governments and international institutions are not moved by information alone, and without official activity the media lacks a hook for a story. A story becomes possible when there is visual evidence of disaster, but in the case of famine that evidence cannot be easily visualized (at least in terms familiar to the media) until people start showing an embodied trace of the food crisis (as in Luke Piri’s distended stomach and prominent ribs) or start dying. By that time, however, because of the indifference of governments, the final stages of a food crisis have begun, the possibility for preventative action has long passed, and the only course of action is humanitarian and remedial.

In Malawi, The Daily Mirror’s claim of two million facing death turned out to be a gross exaggeration, with the best estimate being that 1,000 – 3,000 people
perished. That does not diminish the seriousness of the event, because at the height of the crisis of 2002 nearly 70% of farming families faced food shortages. However, it wasn’t until evidence of ‘excess mortality’ could be pictured that the media had a way of telling the story, and because that is the end of the disaster, coverage emphasizes the shock value, thereby ‘idealizing the photograph’s power to repair the wrong.’

Accordingly, ‘the media is a late indicator of distress, not an early warning. Journalists ...[are] like observers at a car crash, to report on the tragedy, not to prevent it.’ While we can criticise The Daily Mirror’s story and pictures for their reproduction of famine iconography, we have to appreciate how the recourse to stereotypes is often a function of the political context they seek to address but cannot represent. Importantly, this means ‘compassion fatigue’ is not the issue with respect to the relationship between pictures and policy. People continue to respond to the humanitarian structure of feeling induced by photographs like that of Luke Piri. The problem is official indifference and the media’s entrapment in that indifference until it is too late.

The ultimate challenge for photography as a technology of visualization is to find compelling ways of narrating the story so that the political context of famine can be portrayed in a timely manner. Sometimes there are visual stories that achieve this, as in The New York Times photo report detailing how the new Malawian government rejected neo-liberal policies, reinstated fertilizer subsidies, and oversaw increased food production and reduced famine. Of course, journalists don’t bear the primary responsibility for preventing famine but they need a better
understanding of global malnourishment – of which famine is just an acute and more visible part – in order to represent the issue before it is too late.\textsuperscript{40}
NOTES


6 The cover image is available at *Imaging Famine* (http://www.imaging-famine.org/), section 2.

7 ‘20m face starvation in world’s worst tragedy since Ethiopia,’ *The Daily Mirror*, 21 May 2002, pp. 8-9.


9 ‘20m face starvation in world’s worst tragedy since Ethiopia,’ *The Daily Mirror*, 21 May 2002, p. 8.


16 This advertisement is available at *Imaging Famine* [http://www.imaging-famine.org/](http://www.imaging-famine.org/), section 1.


25 Deborah Small, George Lowenstein, and Paul Slovic, ‘Sympathy and Callousness: The Impact of Deliberative Thought on Donations to Identifiable and Statistical Victims,’ *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes* 102 (2007), 143-153; Daniel Västjäll, Ellen Peters and Paul Slovic, ‘Representation, Affect, and


29 Hariman and Lucaites, No Caption Needed, p. 21.


34 Devereux, State of Disaster, pp. 14, 15.


40 See the dimensions of the issue in WFP, ‘Hunger,’ at [http://www.wfp.org/hunger](http://www.wfp.org/hunger), and consider the multimedia approach of the ‘Starved for Attention’ project coordinated by MSF and the VII agency, at [http://www.starvedforattention.org/](http://www.starvedforattention.org/).